

SERIALS STORY

The Sable Lorcha

BY
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SYNOPSIS.

Robert Cameron, capitalist, consults Philip Clyde, newspaper publisher, regarding anonymous threatening letters he has received. The first promises a sample of the writer's power on a certain day. On that day the head is mysteriously cut from a portrait of Cameron while the latter is in the room. Clyde has a theory that the portrait was mutilated while the room was unoccupied and the head removed by means of a string, unnoticed by Cameron. Evelyn Grayson, Cameron's niece, with whom Clyde is in love, finds the head of Cameron's portrait nailed to a tree, where it had been used as a target. Clyde pleads Evelyn to secrecy. Clyde learns that a Chinese boy employed by Philip Murphy, an artist living nearby, had borrowed a rifle from Cameron's lodgekeeper. Clyde makes an excuse to call on Murphy and is repulsed. He pretends to be a fisherman, alleged infractions of the game laws and speaks of finding the bowl of an opium pipe under the tree where Cameron's portrait was found. The Chinese boy is found dead near morning. While visiting Cameron in his dressing room a Nell Gwynne mirror is mysteriously shattered. Cameron becomes seriously ill as a result of the shock. The third letter appears mysteriously on Cameron's sick bed. It makes direct threats against the life of Cameron. Clyde tells Cameron the envelope is empty. He tells Evelyn everything and plans to take Cameron on a yacht trip. The yacht picks up a fisherman drifting helplessly in a boat. He gives the name of Johnson. Cameron disappears from yacht while Clyde's back is turned. A fruitless search is made for a motor boat seen by the captain just before Cameron disappeared. Johnson is allowed to go after being closely questioned. Evelyn takes the letters to an expert in Chinese literature, who pronounces them of Chinese origin. Clyde seeks assistance from a Chinese fellow college student, who recommends him to Yip Sing, most prominent Chinaman in New York. The latter promises to seek information of Cameron among his countrymen. Among Cameron's letters is found one from one Addison, who speaks of seeing Cameron in Peking. Cameron had frequently declared to Clyde that he had never been in China. Clyde calls on Dr. Addison. He learns that Addison and Cameron were one time intimate friends, but had a falling out over Cameron's denial of having been seen in Peking by Addison. Clyde goes to meet Yip Sing, who attempts to follow him, falls into a basement, sprains his ankle and becomes unconscious. Clyde is found by Miss Clement, a missionary among the Chinese. He is sick several days as a result of inhaling charcoal fumes. Evelyn tells Clyde of a peculiarly acting anesthetist which renders a person temporarily unconscious. Murphy is discovered to have mysterious relations with the Chinese. Miss Clement promises to get information about Cameron. Slump in Crystal Consolidated, of which Cameron is the head, is caused by a rumor of Cameron's illness. Clyde finds Cameron on Fifth Avenue in a dazed and emaciated condition and takes him home. Cameron awakes from a long sleep and speaks in a strange tongue. He gives orders to an imaginary crew in Chinese jargon. Then in terror cries: "I didn't kill them." Evelyn declares the man is not her uncle. Evelyn and Clyde call on Miss Clement for promised information and find that the Chinaman who was to give it has just been murdered. Miss Clement gives Clyde a note asking him to read it after he leaves the mission and then destroy it. It tells of the abduction of a white man by Chinese who shipped him back to China. The man is accused of the crime of the "Sable Lorcha" in which 100 Chinamen were killed. The appearance in New York of the man they supposed they had shipped to China throws consternation into the Chinese. The brougham in which Clyde and Evelyn are riding is held up by an armed mob. Clyde is seized by the Chinese and a fight ensues. Evelyn and Clyde are rescued by the police and return home. They find Yip Sing and the Chinese consul awaiting them. Yip tells Clyde the story of the crime of the "Sable Lorcha" in which 100 Chinamen were deliberately sent to their death by one Donald McNish, whom they declare is Cameron.

CHAPTER XXII.—Continued.

"McNish escaped, I presume?" I asked the question more to relieve the tenacity of the silence which ensued, than because of any doubt on this point.

"McNish escaped," he echoed.

"And no one else?"

"The Eurasian cook escaped, too. He broke out of his galley. Hastily he patched together a raft and reached land a week later, more dead than alive."

"And all the rest—those ninety-seven deluded, tricked countrymen of yours—perished?"

"To a man."

"Then the graphic description you have just given me, came—how? From whom? Certainly not from the cook, who was locked in the galley?"

"Partly from the cook, yes," he answered, unmoved. "And partly from one to whom McNish, himself, described his own crime."

The Vice Consul here added a word.

"Moreover," he said, and his accent was in marked contrast with the merchant's perfect English, "we have corroborative evidence. It happened that the lorcha sank in what you call shoal water. Six months later, she was declared a menace to shipping. Under ordinary conditions she would have been dynamited where she was. But because of the tragedy, she was raised, and examined; and the hole in

her bow proved the truth of what we had heard."

In spite of the seriously impressive manner of my informant I was far from credulous. Such a crime might have been perpetrated, but I questioned that the perpetrator, for his skin's sake, if for no other reason, would ever have admitted the deed, much less have truthfully detailed the manner of its commission.

But, even admitting that there was neither invention nor misrepresentation in the narrative, I was now more than ever convinced that Robert Cameron had no part in it, and that in placing even the slightest blame upon him an egregious error had been committed.

"What you tell me," I said, at length, "is very interesting, but I do not see just how it applies to my tortured and now missing friend."

The Vice Consul in an unguarded moment forgot himself.

"You no can see?" he queried, lapsing for the nonce into the vernacular.

"I certainly can not."

Mr. Yip Sing indulged in the shadow of an icy smile.

"Your friend, Mr. Clyde," he said, with a brief impressive pause between each word, "and Donald McNish are one and the same man."

Up to this point I had maintained my poise. I had listened with feigned respect and denied myself the satisfaction of interruptions. But at this preposterous claim, I could contain myself no longer. Before the slowly spoken sentence was complete I had sprung up, restless with impatient indignation, my blood throbbing in my temples, my hands itching to throttle an honest man's traducers.

"That," I cried, hoarse with exasperation, "is a damnable lie!"

If I expected retaliation I was disappointed. Yip Sing's seamed yellow face continued an immobile mask for whatever emotion he may have felt, and Chen Mok placidly consulted his memoranda.

"Robert Cameron," I went on, my passion whetted by their indifference, "has been a gentleman of leisure and fortune always. Of all men in the world he is the last to be accused of such a crime as this. A seafaring man! A smuggler of coolies! It is too preposterous even for discussion. And I want to tell you now, Mr. Yip, and you, too, Mr. Chen, that I shall leave no stone unturned to bring to justice those who are guilty of having made this unthinkable mistake. Hitherto I have been unable to get a clue. But what you have said tonight does away with that difficulty. Both of you shall answer, now, to the authorities."

As I spoke I edged toward an electric push-button, at the side of the chimney-piece, and at the last word, I pressed it.

That Checkabeedy, following my instructions, had remained within close call was demonstrated by his prompt appearance.

"Telephone the police station," I commanded, "to send two officers here at once."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A Tattoo Mark.

Though I spoke in my ordinary tone, the visiting Celestials gave no sign that they heard me. I had expected protestation. I should not have been surprised had I been forced to restrain them—to make them prisoners, in fact, until the arrival of the police. But neither of them either moved or spoke, until the silence, in my nervously excited condition, becoming unbearable to me, I demanded:

"By what right, Mr. Yip, do you make the assertion that my friend and your enemy are one?"

With a supercilious arrogance of manner that maddened me to the limit of self-control, he made reply.

"I was coming to that, Mr. Clyde, when you so unfortunately lost your temper. In stating the purpose of our visit I think I informed you that it was two-fold. In the first place, we came to give what you had asked for—information. In the second place, we came to request something from you—assistance. The motive of the threatening letters which Mr. Cameron received, I think I have made clear. For sixteen years my people, the kinsfolk of the victims of the Sable Lorcha, have searched the world for the fiend who brought upon them a sorrow beyond any that you of the Occident can understand. To us of the Celestial Empire the tombs of our fathers are very dear. McNish robbed these men not only of life but of decent burial."

"That is all very well," I exclaimed, impatiently, "but can't you see that a terrible mistake has been made? Why under heaven you should fancy that in Mr. Cameron, a gentleman to his fingertips, you have found this outlaw McNish is incomprehensible."

Once more Yip Sing smiled his icy smile and the Vice Consul made as if to speak, but thinking better of it, apparently, maintained his stolid silence.

"You were coming to that," I urged.

"The man to whom McNish boasted of his deed was the man who identified him. They had been partners in the Far East in the trade of smuggling coolies. The one, I have no doubt, was no better than the other; yet we believe that our informant was neither directly nor indirectly concerned in the particular piece of brutality of

which I have told you. Eventually, he and McNish quarrelled and parted. For some years he lost all trace of him; and then by accident, one day he came upon him, here in America, living in a palace on Long Island Sound and masquerading under a new name."

"A resemblance!" I cried, in a passion of indignation. "A more resemblance! And on that you and your people conspire to torment and abduct a purely innocent man. Was ever such an outrage heard of! Every one of you shall pay dear for this error."

I might have been the fire wood sputtering on the hearth for all the effect my vehemence had upon that precious pair of Mongolians.

"We understand," the spokesman resumed, "that your friend managed in some way to escape from his captors, and is now in this house."

"Yes," I resumed, hotly. "He's here, more dead than alive unfortunately; but he is coming around slowly and will be quite able to testify when the time comes."

"Mr. Chen Mok," he proceeded, calmly, "has communicated with the State Department at Washington, and the United States authorities are now only waiting our word to put your good, gentlemanly friend under arrest. Mr. Clyde, for the crime he committed on the high seas, sixteen years ago."

For a moment I stared at them in silent amazement.

"You're both mad," I exploded at length, "both crazy. Do you think for one moment I believe such rot as that? Even if what you say were possible—and it isn't—you would have to identify the accused by something better than the mere word of a man who hadn't seen him for years. Of what use would such an identification be against the testimony of Mr. Cameron's life-long friends?"

"Since you doubt our ability to identify," was Mr. Yip's prompt rejoinder, "I may add that there are two marks of identification, which must, I think, convince even yourself."

I laughed grimly. So that was their game! For nearly a month Cameron had been their prisoner. In that time they had examined, inspected, inventoried him—his scars, moles, birthmarks had been listed, and were now to be used to identify him with a renegade murderer of Chinese coolies.

I told my slant-eyed visitors that their trick was transparent. But they only looked at me with an expression which seemed half pity and half contempt.

"Did you ever observe a tattoo mark on your friend's left forearm?" asked Mr. Chen Mok.

"Never," I answered.

"He has one there."

"I am willing to wager something valuable he hasn't a tattoo mark anywhere on his person," I retorted, "and I'll prove it in five minutes."

"We shall be glad to have the proof," said Yip Sing.

Once more I pressed the button at the side of the chimney-piece, and once again Checkabeedy appeared in the doorway.

"You telephoned?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, now send Mr. Bryan to me here, at once." Then turning to Cameron's accusers, I explained: "Mr. Bryan, for whom I have just sent, is nursing my friend. He would naturally know if what you say is true."

To my surprise they made no demur. Yip Sing, however, asked that he might be permitted to put to the nurse the necessary questions, and as I was perfectly confident that no incriminating answers could be given, no matter what the form of catechism, I willingly acceded.

Had I not played tennis and golf with Cameron scores of times on hot summer days when, with shirt sleeves rolled above his elbows, his forearms were bared to view? Could there be any possibility have been a tattoo mark there, and I not have seen it?

Mr. Bryan came quickly, a little puzzled, seemingly, at being called to such an audience. Purposely I kept silence, merely waving an introductory hand toward the two Chinamen.

Yip Sing tactfully explained the situation.

"A question has arisen, Mr. Bryan," he said, with more of suavity in his tone than I had hitherto observed, "whether by any chance your patient has a mark of any character whatever tattooed upon his left forearm. If you have observed such, we shall be glad if you will kindly describe it."

The nurse fung a questioning glance at me, and I nodded reassuringly. I did not wonder that he was surprised at the question.

"Is there, or is there not, such a mark?" the Oriental urged.

"There is; yes, sir."

I think, involuntarily, I started forward. I know that for just a breath I thought my ears had played me a trick. Then, suddenly, there swept back across my memory that expression of Checkabeedy's: "Who between you and me, sir, I don't trust, nobow."

Could it be possible that Bryan was in the conspiracy? But only for the briefest moment did this doubt away amid the welter of my thoughts. Into its place rolled an amazement that shocked and stunned; that checked me all standing, as it were; for Bryan was amplifying, was telling about the mark, which he had first noticed he

said, on the night of his arrival, and which he had examined more closely on several occasions since.

"It's evidently a representation of some sort of sailing vessel," he explained, "with a curved hull and a single broad sail. And below it are three letters: D. M. N."

Blindly I clutched the back of a chair with both hands, for a sense of unreality oppressed me, and the room itself became waveringly unsubstantial.

It was not true, of course, that Bryan was saying. Nothing was true. Nothing was real. It was all a nightmare; and the two gloating yellow masks were horrible dream faces.

"And you have probably noticed a scar—a long livid scar?"

It was Yip Sing's voice I heard. He was still questioning the nurse. And now Bryan would make another preposterous answer, just as persons always do in dreams. I knew he would. So when he said: "Yes, sir, just between the left shoulder blade and the spinal column. It looks as though it were the mark of a deep and vicious knife slash," I was not in the least surprised.

Checkabeedy brought me back to a realization of time and place. He spoke my name in a half-whisper and I awoke again to realities with a start.

"The officers are here, sir," he informed me, matter-of-factly.

"The officers?" I repeated, and then, memory reasserting itself, I added: "Oh, yes, of course. Ask them to wait just a moment, Checkabeedy."

Into the mental marshalling of facts which ensued there came a vivid memory of that weird scene in the sick-chamber when Cameron had raved in a strange tongue, mingled with words of pidgin-English and a few phrases—incriminating phrases, in the light of tonight's revelation—of vigorous vernacular. If what Bryan had said was true—and for him to lie about a matter as readily demonstrable was hardly to be considered—I must conclude myself beaten at all points. From first to last, then, I had been defending a creature unworthy of defense.

It was difficult to accept this conclusion. Mind and heart alike were arrayed against it. Yet, thinking clearly now, I recognized fully the position in which I had placed myself. I had been willing to swear, to wager, there was no tattoo mark, and the best evidence—my own witness—had proved me wrong. Certainly I could expect no mild judgment from these Asiatics. Honest as I had been, they must believe that I had known, and had meant to deceive them. They probably thought that I had signalled to Bryan to endorse me in my lies, and that the nurse had either misunderstood or openly rebelled.

Before Checkabeedy had reached the door, I recalled him.

"On second thought," I said, "the officers need not wait. Tell them that it was a mistake. I shall not require them."

Turning to Yip Sing and his companion, I added:

"What Mr. Bryan has told you is the greatest surprise to me. Even yet I can scarcely believe it, unless the mark and the scar were obtained while my friend was a prisoner in the hands of your countrymen."

"Tattoo marks and scars show age no less than faces," the merchant replied. "Both of these are years old. Any capable judge of such things will tell you that. Possibly Mr. Bryan can tell."

"The scar is not a fresh one," said the nurse. "As to tattoo marks, I am not experienced; but I shouldn't think the mark on Mr. Cameron's arm was put there recently."

"Gentlemen," I said, making a final stand, "while I do not question Mr. Bryan's entire honesty in this matter, nevertheless I prefer to see these marks of identification, myself. If you will excuse us for five minutes, I shall not be longer."

At the foot of the grand staircase, Evelyn joined me. Bryan, at my suggestion, went to the elevator and ascended that way, while she and I slowly climbed the broad, velvet-carpeted marble steps to the floor above.

"I thought you were never coming out of that room," she declared, nervously. "Once, I was on the verge of going after you. The first time you rang for Checkabeedy, I mean."

What did you have him telephone for? He absolutely refused to tell me. Was it the two policemen? . . . What did you want them for? . . . Why did you let them go away again? . . . Aren't those Chinamen ever going? . . . What on earth did you want with Mr. Bryan? . . . What are you going upstairs for, now?"

How tactfully I answered these questions and others I shall not attempt to decide. I know only that I set my teeth to guard the one problem which absorbed me, and which for worlds I would not have her know.

"It is all right, Evelyn," I assured her, over and over again. "There is not the smallest danger. . . . They came to give me information. . . . You must be very tired, little girl. . . . Go to bed, now, and forget it all until morning. . . . Yes, I'll tell you everything, then."

I wonder how many women there are who, burning with curiosity as she was, would have obliged me as she

did! Is it pardonable, then, if again I say that throughout all this trying experience she proved herself a girl of a thousand?

Bryan was waiting for me in the passage outside Cameron's door.

"I left him sleeping," he explained. "and, if possible, I don't wish to disturb him; so we'll go in quietly together."

Slowly and with infinite care lest he make the least noise he turned the knob. Quite as cautiously he opened the door, and tiptoeing softly, we entered.

It was the first time I had been in the room since the day of that terrible outburst, and it still held for me an atmosphere as ghoulishly forbidding as that of a tomb.

Only one lowered light burned, over a tall, antique bureau between the darkly curtained windows; the chamber was in semi-gloom. But scarcely had I passed Bryan, who stopped to close the door with the same adroit silence with which he had accomplished its opening, than a stealthily moving white figure defined itself, issuing, apparently from a massive carved wardrobe, which stood against the wall opposite the huge, tested bed.

The spectacle was at least arresting. I know I halted abruptly as if stricken all at once with total paralysis. For a heart-beat or two I think I stopped breathing. But my eyes meanwhile were strained fixedly upon the apparition, and seeing it pass with almost incredible swiftness beneath the one dim light above the bureau, I recognized Cameron.

At the same moment the room was flooded with a sudden glare. Bryan too, had seen, and had switched on the electric. Simultaneously he flashed past me and was at his patient's side.

"What does this mean?" I heard him say. "What did you want? Can't I trust you alone for ten minutes? I told you, Cameron, that you must not leave your bed unless I am with you."

I saw Cameron cower under the upbraiding in his eyes I read terror, and all my sympathy was aroused on this instant. Bryan might be carrying out Dr. Massey's orders, but he appeared to me unnecessarily harsh.

"What were you doing?" he insisted; and then I saw him roughly grasp his patient's arm, and hold it up, revealing a tightly clenched hand.

"Mr. Bryan!" I cried in remonstrance. "Gently, gently. Remember—"

But the nurse paid small heed to me. He was busy opening the doubled fist.

I stood now where I could look Cameron squarely in the face, but my gaze was elsewhere. It was his left hand over which Bryan was engaged, and from his wrist to his elbow the sleeve of his white night robe had been pushed back, exposing a sinewy forearm, marked precisely as Bryan had described it.

Scrutinizingly I bent forward. The tattooing was indisputable, and, as the nurse had said, it bore no evidence of being recent work.

Up to that moment I had hoped against hope that in some way or other a misconception had occurred. I had hoped, I suppose, for the performance of some miracle which would exonerate this man. And now that hope was obliterated by those blue-pricked letters D. M. N. beneath an almost exact facsimile of the black smudge which had taken the place of signature on each of the three threatening letters—the black smudge, of which Cameron, wearing it then indelibly upon the cuticle, had dared to feign utter ignorance.

And yet, I asked myself once more, how was it that I had never noticed it before? Again and again I had seen that forearm bared. Surely I would have observed so odd a mark; certainly I would have been perplexed by those three unflitting initials.

"There, now!" Bryan was saying. "Back to bed with you, Cameron. What did you want this letter for, anyway? If it was necessary for you to have it, couldn't I have got it for you?"

"Give it back to me!" Cameron was pleading, piteously. "Give it back to me! It is a private matter. Give it back to me, or destroy it before my eyes. Burn it, here, before me."

"Let me have it, Mr. Bryan," I asked, and turning to the unhappy gentleman I said: "You'll trust me, won't you, Cameron? I'll destroy it, unread, if you wish it."

"No, no, no," he objected, earnestly. "Give it back to me."

But even as he demanded it, Bryan put it in my hands; and spreading it out—for it had been crumpled to a pellet in the invalid's clutch—I was about to humor him, when the superscription caught my eye and held it.

The envelope bore the name and address: "Donald McNish, Taylor's Hotel, New York City, U. S. A."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Scarcity of Opium Felt.

Codeline, a very largely used narcotic, is more than twice its normal value, owing to the scarcity of opium. Carboic acid continues to advance in price, and it is not at all unlikely that the cost of household disinfectants may be increased. The most noteworthy of the few articles which have declined in value is glycerine, which, after a long period of high value, now shows signs of coming down in price.